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Modernism's Narrowing · John Wilson

A Review of *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley 1945-1975*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982. 671 pages.

A collected poems should help us toward more definitive judgments where they have not already been made. Creeley's *Collected Poems*, as contrary to that occasion as to tradition in general, do no such thing for me. Increasingly his poems, which appeared volume by volume during the fifties, sixties, and seventies, have become "pieces" of an unascertainable whole and now under one cover further lose their autonomy, especially from *Words* on, and become sometimes fascinating, sometimes frustrating, and sometimes fribbling entries in a lifetime daybook.

In the respect that his poems do tend to run on (in fitful cat-like leaps from point to point) even across the boundaries of individual books, Creeley resembles two of his masters, Williams and Zukofsky—Williams in that he writes poems about the things around him, his immediate experience, everyday, often seizing what is directly present to the mind for the purpose of *forming* a poem; and Zukofsky in the degree to which Creeley shares Zukofsky's belief that "a poet writes one poem all his life, a continuing *song*." If Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Pound's *Cantos* are prefixed to Williams, Zukofsky, and Creeley, it's possible to see Creeley at the extreme end of a loose tradition that he has embraced in these poets: a rejection of or profound distancing from the traditional English verse, close attention paid to developments in the other art forms, a trust in one's own ear and instinct to measure lines, a will to experiment and push poetry into new expression, and a sense that individual poems are in a way stanzas ("pieces," "boxes") of an on-going life's work. But Creeley is an extreme narrowing of them all. Whitman's duration, as long as anyone might wish, shrinks in Creeley as much as anyone (except the officious John Simon) might wish. "There are those artists who are reductive in impulse and those who are expansive, and I'm one of the former," Creeley explains, reductively. Whereas Pound's daily subject was any part of almost all Western culture and a deal of the Chinese, Creeley confines himself almost exclusively to the culture and arts of his day. He's uninterested in history, as Robert Duncan noticed and remarked in Mallorca when Creeley was a young

man. Zukofsky's astounding compendium of verse forms in *A* (broken down as they are) disappears, and his unparalleled incorporation of music restricts to bebop and a few snatches of popular song in Creeley. And Williams—here my mixed feelings toward the man in the poems come in. As much as Creeley has talked about and as close as he has been to Olson, Duncan, and Zukofsky, Williams remains the most powerful influence on Creeley's poetry. Creeley has carried on admirably with Williams' line when he's at his best. But the man, an appeal equal to the formal brilliance in Williams' poetry, narrows as much as the form in Creeley's. Against the characteristics of Williams that Randall Jarrell partially observed—"outspoken, warm-hearted . . . generous . . . fresh, sympathetic, enthusiastic, spontaneous, open, impulsive, emotional, observant, curious, rash, courageous, undignified, unaffected, humanitarian, experimental, empirical, liberal, secular, democratic"—set Creeley's *nervousness* (in his jagged, unstable poetic line), *tension* ("All the world is/this tension"), *isolation* (throughout his poems), *obsession* (with his isolation), *fear* ("I/get scared//in this loneliness"), *abstractness* (in expressing his fear, and in his poems on numbers, geometric shapes, the act of writing, on any subject, in fact), *intensity* (to form only the essential emotion or thought), *violence* (especially when he writes of love). . . . These do not constitute all of the man's attributes, but the difference between Williams and Creeley, as they appear in the poems, is considerable.

What I call Creeley's narrowness is in fact a shared trait in all the arts of the fifties and sixties. More than any other poet, I think, Creeley reflects the direction that especially painting and secondarily jazz had taken in the mid-century. By the time he began *Pieces* (in the late sixties), Creeley had adopted a poet's equivalent method of action painting, or Abstract Expressionism. The *act* of writing became the determining force behind his forms. Like Williams in *Paterson*, Creeley prefaces *Pieces* by announcing his method of writing:

A period
at the end of a sentence
which

began *it was*
into a present,
a presence

saying
something
as it goes.

. . .

No forms less
than activity.

While Williams pieced particulars together, often like a Braque collage and in strikingly original associations, Creeley tries to get the act of perceiving and thinking more than the thing perceived or thought. Writing this way necessarily leads him into a greater abstractness, but the abstractness is infused with emotion—Abstract Expressionism. His language, like Pollock's paint, breaks away from representation and traditional order. His sentences appear to or go astray again and again, the grammar breaks down, the focus jumps, continuousness becomes a string of isolated moments of activity:

One thing
done, the
rest follows.

. . .

Not from not
but in in.

. . .

Here here
here. Here.

. . .

I cannot see you
there for what you
thought you were.

The faded memories
myself enclose
passing too.

. . .

Were you there
or here now—
such a slight sound
what was your step makes.

. . .

Here I
am. There
you are.

. . .

The head
of a
pin on . . .

. . .

Again
and again
now
also. . .

The object of thought is stripped away from the activity and emotion, and images appear often as isolated as the thinking/feeling mind from stanza to stanza, as “The head/of a/pin on . . .” serves to illustrate. The strong sense of isolation felt here and elsewhere in Creeley’s poetry is worked into the form, then. Or as Creeley would prefer it, the form extends from the content. And moment separated from moment, impulse from impulse, are not forced into a unity. “My plan is,” Creeley reveals late in *Pieces*, “these little boxes/make sequences.”

Whether Creeley’s results agree or disagree with me—they do both—

I believe there's virtue in his interest in the other arts of his day. Though he sounds cliquish where the *names* of his literary friends ring out too much (Allen Ginsberg in particular in *A Day Book*), the use he makes of painting and music opens his poetry up. All along Creeley has eagerly, sometimes too aggressively, sought out the new directions in the arts. No poet has absorbed the dynamics of Abstract Expressionism as much as he, even though Duncan had Diebenkorn and Clyfford Still as close friends in the Bay Area. Duncan's poetry is far too complicated, too filled with history and myth, to approach his friends' paintings as closely as Creeley's. There are also clear connections between Creeley and jazz musicians, especially Thelonious Monk, whose jagged solos uncluttered with texture in which the melody is barely heard but not abandoned operate much like Creeley's "pieces" vaguely carrying their themes through the lean, splintery movement of his language. And in drama, Beckett certainly holds the most attraction for Creeley. There's no other playwright as reductive in impulse. In the interview with Terry R. Bacon (*APR*, Vol. 5, No. 6, 1976), Creeley reveals his admiration for Beckett and indicates that he shares the desire that Beckett expressed to him one night in 1968 for "one word that would be autonomous, that would depend upon no other situation either in existence or in creation for its actuality." Make of it what you will—zealotry, absurdity, foolery—there's nothing more intensely reductive in literature than this!

Extremists of experimental art always run the risk of leaving behind them the art form in which they are attempting to work with originality. When Pollock first started pouring paint onto canvas he confessed to his wife that he didn't know if he was making paintings or not. Williams felt the same about *Paterson*: "I don't even know if *Paterson* is poetry. I have no form, I just try to squeeze the lines up into pictures." Creeley has never to my knowledge worried about straying away from poetry as if there were some recognizable confines. Rather he has worried about falling into verse, as Richard Howard carefully notes:

Creeley writes not anti-poems . . . but anti-verses. "The issue is the poem, a single event," Creeley insists, and by issue he means outcome, the specific and reified recognition of the momentary experience: "a poem is some *thing*, a structure possessed of its own organization in turn derived from the circumstances of its making." A poetry without recurrence,

then, is a poetry without verse; a poetry without return or ending . . . is a poetry without rhyme or reason (*ratio*); for rhyme and reason do go together, since the aim of both is to bring things to an end in order that they may begin again; a poetry, as Yeats called it, of precision but no rhythms—there is not a single sentence that anybody will ever murmur to himself. And that is just what Creeley is after, or rather, he is not *after* something but seeking to be *present* with it: a poetry that cannot be murmured, remembered, but rather encountered, confronted.

The successes and failures in Creeley's writing have almost nothing to do with those things around which introductions to poetry are organized: meter, rhyme, metaphor. . . . Rather the quality of an emotion and the intrinsic interest of the language, as we confront them, are what matter. And there are plenty of instances of Creeley's reductive impulse shearing away almost everything to which we might respond, except with a "*hmm . . .*":

Sick

Belly's full
of rubble.

That's a page from *Away*, but is it a poem? "For Ebbe" in *Thirty Things* contracts even further:

And Ebbe
with love.

By comparison haiku become treasures of expansion. Creeley's failures, however, are not failures of execution, but failures of experimentation. Some of Ginsberg's recent poems in rhyme and meter are failures of execution. If we do not insist on reading everything under a title as a POEM, then the bits and pieces accrete to the whole body of writing which, without them, would not be so much Creeley's. The *sincerity* that Zukofsky claimed was at the heart of the Objectivists' writing is doubtless connected to Creeley's method. On more than one occasion Creeley has expressed his admiration and approval of Pound's definition of

sincerity taken from Confucious: "man standing by his word." For Creeley this becomes a kind of resistance to revision, an unwillingness to build up what is not there. When the impulse that gives issue to the poem ebbs, he stops. The buildup comes with the pieces, which Creeley himself will not always call the product of a poet:

"What are you doing?"
Writing some stuff.

"You a poet?"
Now and then.

I am grateful when Creeley the poet, sustaining the poetic mood and situation longer than usual, makes a rare appearance in a scene not broken to pieces with "impression/[torn] from impression." "The Moon" in *Pieces*, for example, relaxes, and we sense the presence of Creeley in a more complete way, as mind and body and voice, and we see the scene with an uncharacteristic roundness, and feel the isolation which is so often Creeley's subject, startle us awake at the end of an otherwise peaceful, lovely poem:

Earlier in the evening the moon
was clear to the east,
over the snow of the yard
and fields—a lovely

bright clarity and perfect
roundness, isolate,
riding as they say the
black sky. Then we went

about our business of the
evening, eating supper, talking,
watching television, then
going to bed, making love,

and then to sleep. But before
we did I asked her to look
out the window at the moon
now straight up, so that

she bent her head and looked
sharply up, to see it.
Through the night it must
have shone on, in that

fact of things—another
moon, another night—a
full moon in the winter's
space, a white loneliness.

I came awake to the blue
white light in the darkness,
and felt as if someone
were there, waiting, alone.

The feeling that I'm in the presence of a more traditional poem here is not altogether accurate. The two points at which Creeley might easily slide fully over into metaphors are both checked, first by the mild disclaimer, "as they say," and second by the resistance in "as if" to see the moon as a conscious being. And the illusion of symmetry in the neat quatrains breaks down in the unrhythmic sentences pushing always forward, without any recurrence in their measure, just as there's no recurrence in different points of view: "Through the night it must/have shone on, in that//fact of things—another/moon, another night. . . ." Compare Hardy's moon poems (e.g., "The Moon Looks In"), and Creeley's abandonment of tradition becomes apparent.

More characteristically Creeley's temperament and perceptions would whittle "The Moon" down to something like "Here Again" in *Away*:

After we
were all
a bed,
a door, two
windows
and a chair.

It may be that he breaks into his own territory more in this poem (a good one, I think, for the way it pivots on that third line and moves us away from the perceiver toward the things perceived), but "The

Moon" is the superior poem, though it is not as memorable as many of the earlier poems collected in *For Love*. It wasn't until *Words* that Creeley started to avoid closure consciously so that his reader, instead of feeling a poem "click shut," as Yeats said it should, is left in motion, still active, headed toward the next poem. In the poems that precede *Words*, one often senses that Creeley wanted to lock this one up, to finish it, to perfect it (bring it to final form). Ironic, bitter, clever, catchy as these poems can be, they are noticeably "poetic" in ways that the later ones are not. "The Flower," for example, is constructed upon a single conceit; in "Naughty Boy" there's a fully realized dramatic situation told in third person; "A Marriage" offers the clean symmetry of a fairytale turned into poem. These are all fine poems, as are "Oh No," "Kore," "The Gift," "If You," and others; and very likely they will remain better known than the poems in *Words*, *Pieces*, *In London*, and more recent books—for the most part, quite simply because they are more self-contained and come closer to fulfilling the usual expectations readers, and anthologists, have for a poem. But Creeley himself, the perceiving, thinking, feeling man, and sometimes poet, is more intimately discoverable in the less "poetic" later works.

Ultimately, this is what we want to know of an author: what do you think, what do you see, what do you feel, what do you know, what have you done? All of these questions should be asked again with *how*. The redoubled questioning serves to address us to both the man and the style, the substance and technique. There are times when the two may become one consideration, when Creeley indentifies completely with the language he speaks in "The Charm," or when the isolate moments of his life become isolate "boxes" in *Pieces*, or when his nervous agitation and fragmentariness come through in the narrow lines that fracture between phrases, often even in the middle of words:

Mouths nuzz-
ling, "seeking
in blind
love," mouths nuzz-

ling, "seek-
ing in
blind
love . . ."

The second stanza, a further narrowing of the already narrow focus in the first, purposefully isolates the emotion that concerns Creeley here. The form, which Creeley's salient mid-century formulation claimed to be an "extension of content," seems to me to be more an extension of emotion than of the subjects that find their way into his poems. In other words, emotion is his content. (The Neo-Expressionist Susan Rothenberg recently has made this exact statement about her paintings.) And the themes that recurrently provoke Creeley to write poems are love between man and woman, the pain of marriage (as he has come to know it), his own isolation, and the activity of his own mind and language and the fear that they are capable of generating.

The complicated feelings that I have toward Creeley are not relieved by his poems on love. Lawrence and Williams have both influenced Creeley's view of love as an instinctual urge sometimes very destructive, but the older writers are pretty beside Creeley, who says under the title "Love,"

The thing comes
of itself
 (Look up
to see
 the cat & the squirrel,
 the one

torn, a red thing,
 & the other
somehow immaculate

This is not an ineffective poem in denying love any connection with conscious acts of will, but the urge and flesh of Creeley's love grow too easily brutal to embrace or like:

I didn't
want
to hurt you.
Don't

stop
to think. It
hurts
to live

like this,
meat
sliced
walking.

I don't doubt Creeley's sincerity here, but that does not influence my desire to keep the distance between his feeling and mine from closing. The analogy in *In London* between "Love's faint trace" and "The smell of stale air/in this cramped room" in which "shit falls," however, is simply a crude departure from "old ways" of writing on love. That is, Creeley is more intent on trying to "change the record" than to express how love feels: "Tracking through this/interminable sadness-//like somebody said,/change the record," he writes in another poem called "Love." Creeley so assiduously tries to avoid the clichés on love that he tends to mistake it for sheer violence here and hormonal secretions there. "Tis not hereafter," but neither is it a black eye and two sticks rubbing together until there's a burst of flame. And Creeley's most likely to realize this when he's most inclined to *think* about it, as he is in "The Act of Love," which concludes,

How *dear*
you are

to me, how love-
ly all your
body is, how

all these
senses do
commingle, so

that in your very
arms I still
can think of you.

Think then he should more often, at the risk of shameful tenderness.

If love is rarely gentle, marriage is rarely peaceful. Years ago, X.J. Kennedy found Creeley's most interesting subject to be the "horrors of marriage"—spouses divided in their desires and therefore isolated, spouses

violently ripping at each other—"The one//man who will/not fuck me/tonight will//be you"—or, worse yet, spouses undergoing the customary concessions that imply, to Creeley, a gradual weakening of their emotional bond:

The first retainer
he gave to her
was a golden
wedding ring.

The second—late at night
he woke up,
leaned over on an elbow,
and kissed her.

The third and the last—
he died with
and gave up loving
and lived with her.

But these were not the terms of Creeley's marriage to Bobbie as revealed in the poems from *Words* on, especially in the last book, *Away*, where the intensity of their marriage and the difficulty they had living together come clearly to the surface, clearly and painfully—for how is there to be a marriage without recurrence and through the intense solitude that Creeley lives in each day?

In the end, Creeley's life comes through most often as intensity, whether it be love's intensity, the intensity of his own isolation, of his marriage, or attempts to make language express what he feels. This is at once a virtue and an impediment in Creeley. His range as a poet in all regards is severely restricted, but along the narrow track that his mind has taken he carries Modernism into new territory, spooky (like Beckett's) but new. Near the end of *Away* Creeley puts together his feelings in a single, powerful poem of nine lines ("Phone") which conveys his most familiar situation:

What the words
abstracted, tell:
specific agony,

pain of one so
close, so distant—
abstract here—

Call back, call
to her—smiling voice.
Say, it's all right.

“Selfishly//alone” Creeley confesses to be, so he must be even when he tries to be otherwise—so that he can hear the words detached, abstracted, assuming form, to tell his pleasure, agony. A man alone, writing. It’s Creeley’s art, compelling, repellent, and it goes on now in the eighth year after the latest poem in this notable collection, toward old age.